Still Lives

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The writing of biography has become a major feature of modern literary life. Biographies win prestigious awards and sell in large numbers. They range from the scholarly (Ackroyd, Gilbert, Bullock) to the tawdry (Kitty Kelley), from lives of great men and women to flimsy gossip -sheets about the Pet Shop Boys and Madonna. We take them for granted, as though there is something utterly natural about this huge interest our culture has in the lives of the living and the dead. But is it natural? Is biography inevitable?

I have just finished reading Rima Handley's excellent study of Melanie and Samuel Hahnemann, A Homeopathic Love Story. There have been lives of the founder of homeopathic medicine before this, of course: semi-hagiographic accounts of a great but sadly neglected figure in medical history. But his second wife Melanie, whom he married at the advanced age of eighty and with whom he spent the last nine years of an already outstanding life, has until now been something of a cipher. Now, out of what once seemed impenetrable mists, she has emerged to take her rightful place as one of the most remarkable women of the early nineteenth century, someone deserving recognition far beyond the narrow cliques of home opathic practitioners and enthusiasts.

Born the Marquise Marie Melanie d'Hervilly, she visited Hahnemann in 1834 as a patient, travelling dressed as a man to his home in Kothen, near Leipzig. She was then thirty-four and already enjoyed a reputation in her native Paris as a woman of exceptional talent, above all as a poet and painter. Following her marriage to Hahnemann at the beginning of 1835 and the couple's departure for Paris soon afterwards, Melanie herself undertook the study of homeopathy. At first assisting her husband, she eventually began to to

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practise medicine in her own right-one of the first women to do so. Dr Handley-

a medievalist by training, now a practising homeopath and psychotherapist- has performed a gargantuan task in rescuing Melanie Hahnemann from obscurity. She uses letters, case notes, poems and an autobiographical account by Melanie herself to paint a vivid and rounded portrait of her subject. The book is literate, readable and informative. But it is, in a sense, run-of-the-mill. It is just what we would expect such a book to be.

Reading it set me thinking of a biography I myself started work on many years ago. My subject was to have been an Iranian woman almost exactly contemporary with Melanie Hahnemann: Qurrat al- 'Ayn, famous in certain circles as a leading figure in the short-lived and ill-fated Babi movement, a revolutionary sectarian group in nineteenth-century Iran. There have been a few plays about her, and Sarah Bernhardt once wanted her own drama, in order to play the role. But no biography.

Like Melanie, Qurrat al-'Ayn was a highly talented woman forced to struggle against male prejudice. Where the former became (not quite legally) a woman physician, Qurrat al-'Ayn succeeded in breaking down even more formidable barriers against her sex by practising (also not quite legally) as a Shi'ite religious scholar. In Iraq, she gave lectures to male students from behind a screen. After her conversion to Babism, she became a leader in her own right, with an influence on the doctrines and politics of the sect second only to that of the founder himself. And in 1848, she was instrumental in calling on her fellow converts to abolish Islamic law, an event she marked by appearing in public without a veil.

Like Melanie too, Qurrat al-'Ayn was a poet, and a fine one at that. Many of her poems are still published in anthologies, and it is likely that they would be better known were it not for her reputation as a heretic. Her end was tragic, strangled on the orders of Nasir al-Din Shah in a garden in Tehran, her body thrown down a well.

Qurrat al-'Ayn has been thought by some - with very little reason, it should be said - to have been a pioneer of women's rights in the Orient. That is an assessment based on wishful thinking more than anything. Babism did not teach and Qurrat al-'Ayn did not preach the emancipation of women - there is, indeed,

good reason to suppose that she would have found the aims of the suffragette movement socially and morally unacceptable. Yet, by her own behaviour, she achieved something that an out and out feminist could not have achieved in her time and place- she demonstrated that a woman might think and act much as a man, might even lead the hearts and minds of men. She was, in a sense, oblivious of her sex, and, for that reason, female emancipation was extraneous to her modes of thought and action.

Looking over my unfinished biography I find it quite dense and stale, and certainly unpublishable in its present form. The reason is not hard to find. It is less a biography of Qurrat al-'Ayn than an academic treatise on the history

of the Babi movement, with occasional glimpses of the role she played in it. And the reason for that is quite simple too: there is virtually no material of a personal kind on which to base a developed biographical study. The movement and not the people in it is what contemporary chroniclers thought important. Even where we possess letters and poems by Qurrat al-'Ayn herself, they deal with doctrine or polemic. She never talks about her husband, who divorced her, her children, who became estranged from her, her uncle, who became her greatest enemy, her feelings as a woman, her childhood, herself.

Why was it possible for Rima Handley to write a satisfactory biography of a fascinating but relatively obscure woman of early-nineteenth-century France while I ground to a halt in my attempt to describe an equally fascinating, equally obscure contemporary who lived in Iran? Was it mere chance, the survival of private manuscripts in one case and their loss or destruction in the other? Only partly, I think. The real reasons have, I believe, more to do with fundamental differences in how the individual is perceived in Western and Islamic society.

In A Lonely Woman, a study of the life and poetry of the modern female Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1935-67), American Iranologist Michael Hillmann makes the following observations:

. . . in the growing number of essays on contemporary Iranian literary figures and movements, scholars make little effort to go beyond already published information in describing the lives of their subjects and seem to think that there may be little of relevance or significance in those lives. In his 'biographical' preface to "A Nightingale's Lament: Selections from the Poems of Parvin

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E'tesami" (1985), Heshmat Moayyad observes: 'Parvin's life may be described in a few lines. It was simple, unexciting, and without any significant ... events.' In an essay on the minor poetess Tahereh Saffarzadeh (b. 1937) ... Farzaneh Milani observes: 'Not much is known about Saffarzadeh's life, and it is practically impossible to fully reconstruct it from the meager published information.'[1]

Hillmann goes on to quote several more such comments, with regard to both male and female writers. He then continues:

The fact is that biography and autobiography are almost non-existent in Persian literature. Almost nothing is recorded of the personal lives of Ferdowsi, 'Omar Khayyam, Sa'di, Hafez, and scores of other poets from Rudaki to Jami in the classical period of Persian literature. If one wonders whether this is so precisely because the necessary information is no longer available, there is the more startling fact that not a single biography exists even of [Sadiq] Hedayat or Nima [Yushij], the 'fathers' of modernist Persian prose and verse respectively, about whose lives the necessary information in the form of eyewitness accounts, correspondence, notes and considerable published data is

readily available. No published biography exists in Persian for any modernist Iranian writer or poet.[2]

What is really astonishing is not so much that last statement as the fact that Hillmann is actually incorrect in his earlier remark that 'biography and autobiography are almost non-existent in Persian literature'. If we ignore the specifically 'Persian' tag and accept materials written in Iran or by Iranians in both Arabic and Persian, biographical literature is so thick on the ground it is hard to understand how an informed writer like Hillmann missed it.

The biographical dictionary as a literary genre had its birth in the Islamic world, in the form of tadhkira or rijal literature. It arose in direct response to an originally religious and legal need. The great corpus of Islamic traditions, records of the alleged sayings and doings of the Prophet and his companions grew up in the first

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three centuries of Islam as a means of providing divine sanction for legal and religious rulings. Each record is introduced by a chain of transmitters: A told me that B told him that he had been told by C, whose father had told him from D, who related from the Prophet - something like that. These chains were crucial to the acceptability of the text. If it could be shown that A had never met B or that D had been dead when C was born, or that someone was a notorious liar, the entire chain might be broken and the Prophetic saying falsified.

A science of recording the details of the men - the rijal - who transmitted traditions developed in tandem with other legal and religious specialisms. By the ninth century, the writing of biography had started to break away from these origins to become a form of literature in its own right. Biographical dictionaries came to be regarded as 'among the most remarkable productions of the later centuries of Islamic culture'. They cover a vast range. There are dictionaries of religious scholars, poets, governors, the famous men of individual cities and regions, soldiers, mystics and women. No library of Arabic or Persian writing would be complete without several shelves of this material.

So what did Michael Hillmann mean when he wrote that 'biography and autobiography are almost non-existent in Persian literature'? I think - and I trust I am not putting words into his mouth - that he may have meant to say that there is no biography or autobiography in the sense that they are understood in Western culture. Certainly, he does go on to attempt to define what he thinks are certain culture-specific attitudes in Iranian life that act against the production of detailed, revealing and informative biography: male protectiveness of females, friendship 'especially of younger critics toward established literary figures', apprehension that candid comment may later prove politically incriminating, and the all-pervasive fear of what mardom, 'people', may say or think, with its inevitable descent into self- censorship.

All of that is true, but the real problem lies, I believe, at a deeper level in

the very origins of Islamic biographical literature. Franz Rosenthal drew attention to this when he wrote: 'Biography . . . was originally a handmaiden of the religious sciences. As such, it was expected to provide only a limited number of dry data. No matter how elaborate they were, biographies of scholars were

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inclined to renounce any literary ambition.'[3] The first Islamic biographies were religious in nature and intent: lives of the Prophet and his companions, then the lives of men who had transmitted their words. Biography necessarily began as hagiography.

This tendency can be seen in the biographical writing of Bahá'ísm, an international religious movement with roots in nineteenth-century Iran. In the case of Bahá'í biographies in English, one might have expected the culture-specific reticence of Iranian hagiography to have given way to a more relaxed European or American style. Not a bit of it. One of the worst books I have ever read is a 451-page biography of the Bahá'í leader Shoghi Effendi (d. 1957). Written by his Canadian widow, Ruhiyyih, this is a manual on how to say virtually nothing in 180,000 words. Politicians and civil servants could read it to advantage. Extracting personal information of any description is like drawing blood from a block of the white marble Shoghi loved to use in his numerous building schemes. We are provided with elaborate details of expansion plans and religious crusades, organisational developments, books written and translated, official correspondence: everything but the man behind them. The book is the very antithesis of good biography. It conceals more than it reveals.

Here, the religious motives for concealment are blatant. To make such a figure too human, to stress his weaknesses or explore his darker side, would be to strain the faith of the ordinary believer, an eventuality to be avoided at all costs. But once begun, such a process taints all lesser mortals. The biographies of other Bahá'ís, like those of Muslim clerics or mystics, are generally devoid of meaningful or insightful information or comment. They adhere faithfully to the strict formula of lives of dedicated service and humble sacrifice. There are occasional anecdotes, but nothing that will rock the boat.

Islam, curiously enough, does not seem at first glance suitable soil for such attitudes to take root in. Like Judaism, it is a worldly religion, as concerned with bodily functions as heavenly rewards. Muhammad is not regarded as divine, but as a man like any other, subject to human passions and to error: Christian deification of

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Jesus, by contrast, is looked on askance. There is a well-known saying in which Muhammad admits to having loved three things: prayer, women and perfume. We know many details of his life, including his sexual life, that would be

impossible to discover about the founder of any other religion.

I include in that number the Iranian founder of Bahá'ísm, a man who died as recently as 1892, and whose biographical details are almost as sparse as those of Jesus Christ. Clearly something happened to biography in the Islamic world between the ninth and nineteenth centuries.

That something seems to have been the growth throughout this period of a highly refined sense of personal privacy. The sense of the inviolability of domestic space is immediately obvious to anyone who walks through a traditional Islamic city, whether it be the old Medina in Fez or a more isolated desert town like Yazd in the centre of Iran. The buildings all face inwards. There are few windows opening on to the street. Those that do have, as in old Cairo, elaborate latticework screens or other obstacles to the prying eye. Traditional homes have two distinct arenas within which action takes place: the space known in Persian as the biruni or 'exterior', where guests are received, and the andaruni or 'interior', where the family (and, in particular, the womenfolk) may carry on their lives without outside interference.

Even in smaller modern homes this distinction is retained by various devices. A male guest may be received inside, but during his visit the women of the house will be kept out of sight, usually in the kitchen, where they will prepare the meal. The sense of separation is preserved in speech. It is impolite to ask after one's host's wife: one must simply enquire about the wellbeing of 'the house'.

Outside the home, this need for privacy is continued by means of the veiling of women. The word for 'veil' in Persian, chador, actually means a tent, as though the home itself were somehow transported into the public sphere. This covering of the self is not restricted to women. Tuareg men veil their faces. In traditional painting, the faces of the Prophet and other sacred figures are regularly depicted with a long white veil.

Arabic and Persian speech uses numerous devices to extend this concealment to the verbal sphere. We have already noticed the use

of 'bayt' or 'house' to refer obliquely to a man's wife. In speaking or writing of the Prophet, it is customary, indeed obligatory, to use honorific phrases to demarcate his name from those of other mortals. In literature generally, allusion, euphemism and hyperbole are common rhetorical devices.

The notion of privacy, particularly of female privacy, is closely connected, both semantically and conceptually, to the Islamic legal category of forbiddenness, expressed through the Arabic root hrm. This is a complex root from which a wide range of words may be derived. Meanings and usages run into one another in a most intricate and suggestive fashion.

Things that are haram, for example, are both 'sacred' and 'prohibited'-'taboo' in the strict sense. As a noun, the word can refer to a religious sanctuary

(such as the Kaaba enclosure at Mecca) or to a wife. The harem is not only a term for an area of a palace reserved for women (or for the women themselves), but may be used for any inviolable place or sacred precinct. Ihram refers to the state of ritual consecration into which both male and female pilgrims enter when they make the hajj to Mecca, wearing seamless white garments, shaving their heads, and abstaining from sexual intercourse. In Christian Arabic, hirm means excommunication.

Three things seem to join forces here to develop the sense of what is haram: holiness; impurity (as with pork or wine); and sexual activity (or, by extension, women, in whom sex is invested). All exist within conceptual spaces that mark them off from ordinary life. All define boundaries that may not be crossed, spatial, social and moral circles of inviolability.

Untouchability is a recurrent theme in Islamic thinking and behaviour. On the outside cover of most copies of the Qur'an, you will find the phrase 'let none but the pure touch it': The pious will perform ablutions before they set hands on the book. They will not hold it below waist height or lay it on the floor or beneath other books. The very pious will pick up scraps of waste paper from the street and place them on walls in case they bear anywhere on them verses from the sacred text. The strict will neither sell nor give the book to non-believers.

Najasa is a term widely used in Islam, particularly among traditional Shiites, where it refers to the impurity of things that may contaminate the believer. Pork is najis, dogs are najis,

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and, in the strictest legal sense, unbelievers are najis. Touching any of these or other unclean objects or persons makes void the purity of the believer, which must be restored before he can again engage in normal activities. The parallel with taboo is obvious.

The world is thus divided into two distinct spheres: that of the unclean and untouchable and that of the clean and touchable. Sex, of course, renders the participants impure. The private world of the bedroom thus partakes of the realm of the untouchable. A man may not pray after sex until he has performed an ablution. Purity is inherently unstable and under constant threat of contamination.

In his study of the Satanic Verses debacle, A Satanic Affair, Malise Ruthven identified a recurrent use of sexual imagery in the statements of Muslim opponents of the novel. 'What he has written is far worse to Muslims than if he had raped one's own daughter,' one leading protester told the Guardian. 'It's like a knife being dug into you - or being raped yourself,' said another.

'The connection between faith and sexuality is, if anything, more entrenched in Islamic cultures than others,' Ruthven observes. The world, he notes, is divided in the Qur'an between the realms of the revealed or exoteric (al-shahada or al-zahir) and the hidden or esoteric (al-ghaib or al-ba tin).

The realm of the hidden, he argues, has close connections to that of sexuality. In another context, it is a realm in which the Prophet has been cocooned by his hagiographers. Salman Rushdie's iconoclastic entry into that sacral space was perceived 'as a violation, as a kind of 'rape'".

This argument deserves to be taken further. It is, in fact, precisely the biographical elements in The Satanic Verses which caused the greatest outrage. The desacralizing of the Prophet, however noble its intentions, violated several codes of honour. If the character of Mahound is to be assimilated to the Prophet - and it seems reasonable that he should be, though by no means reasonable to pretend that he is the Prophet - then, in a sense, he represents all the biographies of Muhammad that have not been and can never be written, the anti-hagiographies that lie beneath the surface of the blandly pious 'real lives'.

The modern novel is, if you like, the most intimate form of

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biography or autobiography. Through novels we enter, not only the most private dimensions of other people's lives, but even their thoughts and fantasies. It is the peculiar power of the best novels that they enable us to live vicariously, to partake momentarily of what is otherwise the most hidden of realms, the inner lives of other human beings.

It is here, I think, that the real meaning of the Satanic Verses furore must be sought. Traditional Islamic culture made the writing of biography one of its central undertakings, and yet, in doing so, denatured it by declaring out of bounds any hint of the hidden realm of men's real lives. The diary and the confessional narrative never became a part of Arabic or Persian literature. Other men's lives were approached through the same medium as the lives of saints: the bowdlerised and sanitized eulogy. The Prophet's life itself was subjected to revision and pious dehumanising.

By drawing freely on the prophetic biography while subjecting it to the transformations of the novelistic form, Rushdie brought to light the deepest fears of Muslim culture: the fear that one's own inner self may be brought to view, that hagiography may become biography and biography a vehicle for doubt. The fear that what lurks within the realm of the personal unseen may turn out to be as dark and unsparkling as what lies on the surface. It was, perhaps, Salman Rushdie's error to have attempted to shed light on the inner life of Islam by starting at the very centre, at the heart of the realm of what is untouchable and hidden.

It is one of the functions of art, according to Freud, to heighten man's 'feelings of identification', 'by providing an occasion for sharing highly valued emotional experiences'.[4] Fiction, drama and biography in particular, I believe, provide us with a means to achieve a sense of identification through the glimpses they give us of other people's lives. That some of these lives are fictional and some 'real' is irrelevant. Beyond this, such works of art enable

us to obtain insights into the multiple personalities each of us possesses. The novelist is able to express through his characters aspects of his own personality normally suppressed, the

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reader to obtain an understanding of drives and wishes scarcely recognised.

Until recently, Islamic society was devoid, not only of insightful biography, but of the novel and the drama too. The prohibition of representational art (as a back door for the production of idolatrous images) has all but closed off portraiture, whether in painting or sculpture, leaving Muslim artists with highly stylized, formal renderings of conventional scenes or, in a more strictly religious atmosphere, with the arts of calligraphy and ornament. Music - for some, the most personal of all the arts - has time and again been the object of anathema from the ranks of the ulama.

It is difficult to begin to appreciate just what this means. In her scathing study of Islamic sexuality, Woman in the Muslim Unconscious, Fitna A. Sabbah describes how a fictive paradise is made the model for life on earth, depriving believers of will and creativity, of anything that may disturb the sacred order God has imposed on His creation:
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'Paradise, with its food and its houris, is programmed for a consumer-believer deprived of the creative dimension. The believer is fulfilled in Paradise by renouncing all the potentialities that define 'a human being, all possibilities of making choices not programmed by an external will. The purpose of the believer is to fit himself into the plan organized, conceived, and programmed by another will. The purpose of the believer is to reduce himself to a consumer and annihilate within himself his creative potential, for to create within the paradisal context would be to disturb the order and destroy the plan. The believer is passive: He digests, makes love to a houri deprived of a uterus (for she is a virgin), and relaxes. Like the houri, he forms an integral part of a system where he exists as a thing deprived of will. The only difference is that the houri is consumed as an object by the believer, and he is consumed as an object by the system. In the Muslim Hereafter, where one would expect that the spiritual dimension of the being would be magnified, one witnesses the metamorphosis of the human being into a thing. In the ideal society of Islam, the ideal citizen, the successful believer, is an automaton reduced to a few limited, programmed movements of the digestive tract and genital apparatus.'[5]

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It is this reification of the believer that lies, I believe, at the heart of our dilemma. By dressing all women in much the same costume, above all by covering the face, the seat of individuality and recognition, it is possible to transform each single woman into a stereotype of 'woman' as she ought to be, as she is prescribed for in the law. A man may go abroad with his face uncovered, but even here the law lays down how he should wear his hair and beard, how he should dress, how he should eat, drink, urinate and make love. There is little

room for the individual. The image of rank upon rank of believers praying in unison brings home how powerful is this erasure of man as individual and his replacement by man as believer, as an ordained type.

Of course, the reality of Muslim society has been quite other than this. Muslims are individuals, they are creative, inventive, different. But the pressures are undeniably present. The inculcation of a norm to which each individual must conform, the fear of innovation, the elaboration of rules for all areas of human conduct--all have conspired to render individuality something very close to a sin. Within that context, it can be imagined how disruptive the novel or the closely-observed biography would be. They would show how little the average man or woman does in fact conform to any ideal standard, how complex desires, dreams, fantasies, rebellions and whims reside in all of us and make us what we are as much as or more than external regulations.

One of the most central problems for Muslims in the modern period has been that of identity - of finding old identities or forging new ones. Ironically, the very shari'a-mindedness that is looked on as a route to the rediscovery of the Muslim self is more likely to imperil any real formulation of personal identity, precisely because of its stress on conformity to an exaggerated ideal. It is not by reference to hagiographically-determined model types and religiously-prescribed behavioural norms that individual Muslims will find any abiding sense of personal worth, either in themselves or in their colleagues. Would it be presumptuous to suggest that such discoveries might best be made in the arts of the novel and the biography, or in the rounded characterisations of the theatre and the cinema?

Such a development, should it take place, would have profound consequences for everyone. For Westerners, Muslims would

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emerge from the mist of stereotype as individuals with lives very like our own. And for Muslims, there would be the possibility of an understanding that, to live a life with all the flaws and weaknesses of the individual is not to fall short of a fictive divine standard but simply to be human.

Footnotes

A Lonely Woman: Forough Farrokhzad and her Poetry, Three Continents Press/Mage Publishers, Washington D.C., 1987, p. 148.

Ibid, pp. 148-50.

In Joseph Schacht and C.E. Bosworth (eds.), The Legagy of Islam, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 327-8.

Sigmund Freud, 'The Future of an Illusion', in Civilisation, Society and Religion. The Pellican Freud Library, vol. 12, London, 1985, p. 193.

Fitna A. Sabbah, Woman in the Muslim Unconscious, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland, New

York, 1984, pp. 96-7.

Addendum: Note sent to a listserver

Date: Mon, 30 Jun 1997

From: Denis MacEoin

Subject: Biographies

Just a few observations further to those in my essay about biography [above]. The factors I mentioned there - privacy, sexuality, etc. - are all clearly important elements in the degree to which a biography or autobiography can become open or closed. What I don't adequately address is how far the factors of constraint have their roots in Islam (which is where I mainly place them) or in Middle Eastern (or Iranian) society, or, for that matter in Eastern society, or, indeed, whether there are other locations for the problem.

While I think there have to be particular features of Islam which create difficulties (the initial obsession biography and the later emasculation of biographical narrative), it's naive of me not to stress the fact that emasculated biography also exists in other societies. The fact is that completely open narrative only really exists in modern, open societies. The extreme end of the spectrum is the excessive intrusion into privacy of modern Western media, and, more generally, the abolition of privacy, as George Steiner has argued. Media intrusion can be prurient and embarrassing (what makes Bill Clinton's sex life different to anybody else's?) or enlightening, as we recently saw here in the UK with the exposure of a lying and cheating member of parliament. Oddly enough, in a non-democratic environment, we might have heard of Clinton's self-exposure (if it happened), but not Jonathan Aitken's perjury.

The question now is whether the closure of biography and autobiography within the Bahá'í community owes more to its Islamic/Iranian background, or to its lack of democratic process. I don't want this to move over into an area for controversy and abuse. I just want to say that, as things stand, there are no properly democratic procedures within the Bahá'í system. Whether that's good or bad is another matter, it just seems to me to be a matter of fact. Looking at biographical narrative from that perspective, I think Western Bahá'í biography may possibly owe more to this feature of the movement than to those I elaborate in my essay.

If you read most Bahá'í biographies - and the shining example is The Priceless Pearl - you'll see that narrative concentrates almost exclusively on public persona. The public is safe, because it gives us the individual intermeshed with the system. No chance here of details about sex lives (notice how Shoghi Effendi is almost literally emasculated in Priceless Pearl), chancy friendships (or friendships at all), incautious dinner-party remarks, or private thoughts. In a closed system, this is essential, because matters of that kind are inclined to get between the individual and the system, to dislodge him from its matrix, to provide chinks in what should otherwise be uniform. (As an example of this kind of thinking, I recommend the passages

dealing with Jung Chang's eminent Communist father, in Wild Swans - his utter dedication to the Communist cause led to some pretty awful treatment of his wife and family.)

In an open society, this sort of thing doesn't matter so much. If anything, the more we know about someone, whether they be a public official or an ordinary man in the street, the more valuable it is. We don't need pretense any longer. We're able to accept that somebody may be unfaithful to his wife and yet be a caring bishop, or think rebellious thoughts and still prove a staunch defender of his country. One of the pleasures of reading biography is that of self-recognition. That, however, only happens when the narrative is open and includes material we can recognize; when it is closed and the subject elevated above normal human passions and failings (as in Priceless Pearl), we may as well read the life of a statue.

My assumption is that Bahá'í biography will continue to emphasize hagiographical matter above the merely mortal. But to the extent that Bahá'ís in many countries are in contact with democratic norms (and even benefit from those norms), there must be some room for change. I don't have much hope about ever reading a frank biography of Bahá' Allah, 'Abd al-Bahá' or Shoghi Effendi (or Ruhiyyih Khanum, or a Hand, or a House member, or a Counsellor), but perhaps less illustrious individuals will provide an arena in which these issues can be explored adequately.

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